Whatcha Gonna Do Now?

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It's another typical Navy day– one dive–but maybe, for a change, some early liberty. OK, let's do it right. The ship's tagged out, the weather's good, and the Mk-21 pre-dive checklist has been completed. You've finished, checked and verified the operational procedures. You've lined up the chamber and briefed the dive team, and everyone understands the job. The divers look and feel good (What else is new?). The standby diver is OK, and we have good communications and air. Code Alpha is closed up on the ship, as well as on the dive boat. The ship is announcing diver warnings every 15 minutes over the 1MC, and safety observers are stationed. Here we go.

"Red diver, stand up, go to the ladder, go down the ladder, put your helmet awash, and do your in-water checks... Understand red diver ready to leave the surface. Give proper line-pull signals. Let me know when you leave the surface and when you reach the project. Give OKs all the way down... Red diver left the surface; chart man mark the time... Understand, red diver OK and on the project... Red diver, ventilate, ventilate... Red diver, circulate, red, circulate... OK, red, go to work."

Everyone should be familiar with these five steps of the operational risk management (ORM) process:

1. Identify hazards. *An easy way to do this is to think through the major steps for the operation and list the conditions that can injure people, damage equipment, or degrade the mission. These are your hazards, or simply "what can go wrong." Remember, hazards can include such things as loss of money, time, security, and readiness, as well as unsafe conditions, when you're talking about mission degradation. To make this process easier, brainstorm with your peers, asking, "What if...?" and thinking about cause and effect.*

2. Assess Hazards. *After identifying the hazards, prioritize them based upon the severity and chance of occurring, so that you deal with the most significant hazards first.*

3. Make risk decisions. *Using your prioritized list, determine if the benefits outweigh the risks. If they do, keep moving down your list of hazards. If the risk is unacceptable (e.g., death or permanent disability could occur) and you cannot reduce it, notify your chain of command and determine whether the operation is to be accomplished.*

4. Implement controls. *To complete this step, identify the causes of your hazards. Once you have identified them, it will be easier to select controls, including engineering controls (weight test, limit length of hose), administrative controls (checklists, instructions), and personal protective equipment (wetsuits, gloves). Also, don't forget about training, an excellent method of hazard control.*

5. Supervise. *As a dive supervisor, you must be aware of everything that is happening on your dive station. Make sure the controls you and your divers have implemented are, in fact, working as planned. Finally, keep alert for changes or new problems that might arise. When something changes, stop and reassess the operation before proceeding. Don't let new hazards creep into your operation. Stay alert and try to predict the next problem.*

The dive is going well. As the dive supervisor, you are on top of things, and your team is working well together. The console operator and chart man are paying attention and keeping you informed of the maximum depth, compressor and bank pressures, as well as diver status. Your tenders are alert and keeping a good tend on the diver. Your standby diver and tenders are in the shade and resting comfortably. So far, so good.

Suddenly, you hear a groan over the comms. "OK, red?" you ask. There's no answer. The chart man tells you he can't hear any breathing over the comms.

Whatcha gonna do now?

The unexpected can happen at any time, even to the most highly trained team. Believe me, the time to consider emergency procedures is not when a routine job suddenly turns downhill and those watches you're wearing begin to weigh a ton apiece. In diving, the initial reaction to an emergency must not only be correct, but timely. Unless you, the diving supervisor, have taken the time to consider what your actions are going to be before the dive starts, chances are you'll freeze when faced with an emergency.

Volumes Two and Three of the U.S. Navy Diving Manual devote complete chapters to operations planning. They contain information you should follow for any job, no matter how trivial or routine, but that may not be enough. As a diving supervisor, you are responsible for the well-being of your dive team. You owe it to your divers to consider the correct reactions to likely emergencies before starting a job. ORM is a valuable tool for doing just that *(see sidebar on opposite page)*.

It has been said that emergency planning is the single most important difference between a great dive supervisor and an average one. As the supervisor, it is your job to gather the dive team and do jobs that often are full of risk. We cannot remove all the risks, but with ORM, we can sort out the unnecessary ones so that we operate at the safest level possible to accomplish the mission.

Getting back to our scenario...Whatcha gonna do now? Since you used ORM to plan the dive, you are ready to go. One of the hazards you might have listed is loss of comms. Because you considered this hazard, you are prepared for what you and your team will do if you lose communications.

Navy photo by PH1(DV) William L. Krumpelman II

A smart diving supervisor plans for emergencies before starting an operation like this.

"Tender, send one to red diver," you calmly order.

Your tender replies, "Sent one...received one."

You can relax. Your diver is OK, and you still have comms. Now you've got time to figure out why your comms box isn't working. After looking around, your team discovers that the log man had accidentally kicked out the wires on the box with his big foot. Fortunately, it's just a matter of plugging the comms box back in. Once you've re-established primary communications, you discover the groan the red diver let out was just a sound of frustration after dropping a tool.

Each job is unique and has slightly different risks to overcome. Study the task, use all your assets to formulate a plan, and spend time reviewing reactions to anticipated emergencies. You always should have the correct and timely answer to "Whatcha gonna do now?" To do anything less is to jeopardize your divers.

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